

THE VILLAGER

In 2007, when then-Sen. Barack Obama began his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president, his signature issue was his opposition to the war in Iraq. This well positioned him against his chief rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, who in 2002 had voted in favor of going to war. Obama wasn't elected to the U.S. Senate until 2004 so he had the good political fortune of not having cast a vote for or against the Iraq War.

During the 2008 presidential primary, Obama campaigned heavily against the unpopular war in Iraq by criticizing the Bush administration's decision to invade the country based on their allegations that Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat to U.S. national security interest. The Bush administration's rationale for the invasion was that Saddam Hussein presented an imminent threat because he was developing weapons of mass destruction in clear violation of the 1991 cease fire agreement that ended the first Gulf War. Following an exhaustive search by coalition forces in post invasion Iraq, the alleged Iraqi stockpiles of WMD never materialized.

While Obama criticized the U.S. intervention in Iraq as the "wrong war" he praised our involvement in Afghanistan as being the "right war" for our country to prosecute. This was because our involvement was justified by the World Trade Center attack on 9/11, which was planned and coordinated by al Qaeda in their safe harbor in Afghanistan given them by the Taliban.

However, it is my contention that Afghanistan was never the "right war" for our country to be so deeply involved in. No doubt, the initial actions of the Bush administration in Afghanistan were brilliant. Shortly following the 9/11 attack, air, advisory, and logistical support was given to the anti-Taliban forces, the Northern Alliance, who successfully fought the Taliban and were able to push them and al Qaeda allies completely out of their country.

The United States had an extraordinary opportunity at that moment to say to the victors on the ground that so long as they keep Afghanistan from becoming another breeding ground for terrorism we would continue to provide support to them. We also would have been in a position to encourage them to expand their governing coalition to better reflect the ethnic and religious composition of the country and to improve the status of women in their society.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration made a terrible and costly mistake. Instead of saying to the victors on the ground that we will support you so long as you keep al Qaeda and the Taliban from returning to Afghanistan, we forced them aside and superimposed a political process over the country that gave them the government that we wanted them to have without regard to the political culture of the Afghan people.

The Bush administration had an opportunity to achieve our security goals in Afghanistan without the extraordinary cost to our military that has been paid in blood: over two thousand dead and so many more wounded. This year alone, the cost to U.S. taxpayers for all Afghanistan related costs will exceed \$100 billion.

The United States must return to a foreign policy that is less idealistic and more realistic. We must maintain strong conventional forces to deter those who otherwise would wish to attack us and support indigenous factions within a given region that share our security goals instead of invading, pacifying and administering whole countries under the impossible goal of trying to make them look like us.

If I accomplish anything during my tenure as a member of the House Armed Services Committee it will be in making sure that our nation never goes down the path of nation building ever again.

By Rep. Mike Coffman

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